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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5937

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0543

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000114

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR WALLER
DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

BAGHDAD PASS TO PRT IRBIL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2019

TAGS: PGOV PHUM IZ SY

SUBJECT: IRAQI KURDS REBUFF SYRIAN KURDISH ACTIVIST'S
REQUEST FOR COOPERATION

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 00203

1B. 08 DAMASCUS 00227

1C. 08 DAMASCUS 00788

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: We met with a Damascus-based Kurdish activist on February 3 who had smuggled herself from Syria into Kurdistan, Iraq on November 22, 2008 to solicit support from a range of Kurdish parties, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), for ongoing Kurdish political actions in Syria. The Iraqi Kurds, however, reportedly proved unwilling to promise any immediate or specific future assistance to their Syrian counterparts. END SUMMARY.

NO SURPRISE: SYRIA-IRAQ BORDER STILL A LEAKING SIEVE

12. (C) Reinforcing USG statements on the porosity of the Syria-Iraq border, Hervin Osse, a longtime Embassy contact and a Damascus representative of the Kurdish Future Movement Party (KFM), related to us how she easily "smuggled" herself into Iraq on November 22, with the aid of KFM activists in Syria. Her organization had, she said, made contact on the Iraqi side with unidentified individuals who were paid \$400 USD to safely transport Osse through the Iraqi checkpoint. According to Osse, who could hardly contain her enthusiasm in the re-telling of her "adventure" and appeared delighted with her own bravura, crossing the Syrian demarcation posed no problems. Having located a "house with a garden" (NOTE: we take garden here to mean agricultural fields, but modest in size. END NOTE) situated on the Syrian line, Osse told us she simply walked across in broad daylight at 1330h. Once across, she said she rejoined the road where a car was waiting for her. The Iraqi check-point guard, she said, did not even ask for her passport, and it was clear to her that he had been paid in advance to allow them to pass unmolested.

13. (C) Osse's "cover" entering Iraq was as a bride-to-be meeting her betrothed at his family home in Kurdistan. Two months later when she wanted to return to Syria, she put on a "wedding ring," claimed she was newly married but needed to go home to her family. Her return to Syria on January 17, Osse recounted, was more fraught with logistical difficulties, despite KFM's having paid in advance. Her Iraqi contacts argued the crossing was too dangerous due to U.S. military patrols in the area and it ultimately took a week to find a car to make the drive. The trepidation surrounding U.S. military movement on the border, Osse observed, seemed inflated since she "never saw" any patrols,

though at one point she was able to see what appeared to be a U.S. military "camp." The actual crossing back into Syria, she said, was as easy as getting into Iraq; and she added that next time she went she would not need to spend \$400 USD to do so. She speculated that the going rate for bribing the guard was the equivalent of 2,000 Syrian Pounds (approximately \$40 USD), and that a driver could be found for roughly the same amount.

IRAQI KURDISH GROUPS REBUFF KFM REQUESTS FOR AID

¶14. (C) The purported focus of KFM's outreach to Iraqi Kurdish groups was, Osse explained, to persuade them to provide financial support to, and media coverage of, the situation of Kurds in Syria. Expressing no small amount of indignation, Osse told Poloff that it was difficult to understand why Kurdistan TV had paid scant attention to the travails of Syrian Kurds. Her hope in going to Iraq had been to turn the gaze of Iraqi Kurds across the border to Syria where Kurdish opposition groups have mounted campaigns against government actions perceived to be discriminatory and, in some cases, lethal over the last few years (refs A, B, & C).

¶15. (C) During her stay in Iraq, Osse met with a number of Kurdish organizations, most prominently representatives from the PUK's Public Relations Office and KDP political advisor Azad Berwari. "We can not support Kurdish parties in Syria" was the first thing Berwari said upon sitting down, Osse said. He continued, she said, by informing her that in the KDP's 10th Congress a decision had been made not to provide

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any public support to Kurdish parties, that they did not want to provoke SARG dissatisfaction. Osse told Poloff she "couldn't believe it"--that Berwari would, at the outset of the conversation, cut short the possibility of support for Syrian Kurds before even hearing her out. Osse had especially hoped that KDP-run Kurdistan TV might begin to run stories on Kurdish activism in Syria. The PUK public relations officers she met with were more gracious on the whole, she said, but only went so far as to say "we hope to have good relations in the future."

¶16. (C) COMMENT: Over the last six months, Kurdish public activism has quieted considerably while frustration has appeared to be on the rise. While we cannot unequivocally say that there is trouble within or among Kurdish activists, their coordination on the November 2, 2008 demonstration in Damascus against Decree 49 did not produce a significant turnout (ref C). PUK and KDP's reported rebuff of KFM's requests, and the surprise Osse registered over it, may suggest a conscious decision in Irbil and Sulaymania to avoid any steps that the SARG might view as provocative. On the other hand, it might also be the case that Osse's mission fell outside established lines of communication. We will follow up with other Kurdish contacts to see if the KDP message is consistently voiced to Syrian Kurds. END COMMENT.
CONNELLY